

I spent a good deal of this past week in the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula attending events and catching up with folks. It's easy for people in Washington to get caught up in events and forget about what is important back home; that's why I drive home to Montross every night even when Congress is in session and why I'm enjoying the August District Work Period so much. This week I attended a meeting on creek dredging around the Northern Neck, and I've also been focused on the problems arising from an enlarged population of cownose rays in the Chesapeake Bay. First, the dredging of creeks may not seem as pressing as the impending healthcare debate, but those folks with homes off of creeks, the bait shops, marinas and other commercial ventures, are feeling the pinch of creeks that are coming close to silting in, essentially blocking all flow of water traffic. The effort to secure dollars for dredging has always been an issue and will become even bleaker given the current budget outlook.

I met this week with the Army Corps of Engineers and local officials to chart a course to meet future dredging needs. We are proposing innovative solutions to group together projects across localities to cut costs and time on dredging. In fact, a significant share of the costs associated with dredging is simply mobilization. So if we were to group projects across a region and begin them together rather than over a prolonged time period, we can both speed up the process and get more bang for our buck.

Over the last several years populations of cownose rays have exploded in the Chesapeake Bay, and along the eastern seaboard. Rays move through the bay eating hundreds of millions of tons of shellfish, including oysters. An overabundance of rays is negatively impacting the oyster populations which are a natural filter that the Bay desperately needs to return to its previous condition. These rays, which swim in large groups, have descended on oyster reefs some established by the Army Corps of Engineers and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) or the seafood industry and eat them up like potato chips; often to the tune of millions of dollars in damages.

I met not too long ago with the Virginia Marine Resource Commission, NOAA and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science to discuss securing dollars to study the reasons and solutions to this developing problem, which stems from an ecological imbalance in the Bay. I will continue to work on both of these issues through my meetings in the District and look forward to reporting back favorably upon them in the near future.

*Congressman Rob Wittman represents the First District of Virginia. He was elected to his first full term in November 2008 and serves on the Natural Resources Committee and the Armed*

*Services Committee where he is the Ranking Member of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee.*